The Benefits of Virtual High Schools

Mark Harming

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Dr. Lynette Molstad-Gorder

Dakota State University

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The latest revolution in the field of education has been the development of “distance learning”. The expansion of the internet has led to “extraordinary growth” in virtual school programs. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the benefits of Virtual High Schools, in particular, and to also analyze what makes a “Virtual High School” successful.

The growth of Virtual High School programs nationwide is staggering. There are virtual schools sponsored by the individual states in 27 states, with an additional 6 states with state led on-line learning initiatives. In fact, 24 states have developed full-time on line schools. The *Keeping Pace* study counts 45 out of 50 states that now offer either a virtual school, a fulltime online school, or both. *Keeping Pace* is an annual review of online learning involving experts from several state’s Dept of Education, experts in subject matter, and Directors of virtual schools.

In the past year, Virtual Schools provided roughly 320,000 course enrollments (one student taking one semester-long course). The largest of these is the Florida Virtual School. The Florida Virtual School employs 425 fulltime teachers, and 150 part-time, offering approximately 86 different courses. In 2008-2009 alone, the FVS had more than 150,000 course enrollments. This is an increase from just over 100,000 the previous year.

The South Dakota Virtual School (SDVS) is one of the newest programs, beginning in the school year 2008-2009. The SDVS had 2,434 registrations in that year. The SDVHS calls itself a “clearinghouse of distance education courses that have been approved by the South Dakota Department of Education.” The Instructors of the courses, are paid by their employers (their own school district). In its first year, the SDVS had students from 88 different school districts enrolled in a SDVS course.

The field of “Virtual Schooling” is expanding, and expanding rapidly. New Jersey’s Virtual School Principal, Patricia Gianotti says, “We are always expanding. Our original student base was primarily composed of academically adept students who wished to improve their GPA or access a course not available in their district at their grade level, and summer school students. Now we are establishing alternative education virtual programs onsite in various districts as well as making available high school courses, supplemental instruction and GED prep courses to residential programs, shelters, transitional housing centers and juvenile justice facilities.” This is a common theme as you read the research, schools begin by offering classes not offered to high achieving students (such as AP classes), and continue to grow and add courses that can benefit basically anyone from the student population.

The increases in enrollments are seen nearly universally. It does not seem to matter if the state is rural or urban, Northern or Southern, Eastern or Western. The following is a sampling of the enrollment increases for various states from 2007-08 to 2008-09.

* Florida- 25% increase
* Idaho – 46% increase
* Alabama – 48% increase
* Michigan – 45% increase
* Minnesota – 19% increase
* Colorado - 26% increase
* Ohio – 13% increase
* Arizona – 24% increase

And it’s not just state schools either, both the Connections Academy and K12 Inc, which are nationwide, private schools, have seen a growth of 54% and 42%, respectively. Although the exact number of nationwide online students is unknown, it is increasing rapidly, and suggested to be somewhere around 47% over the past two years.

One of the factors that help in the expansion in the field is the use of Course Management Systems (CMS). Systems such as Webct and Blackboard are enjoying wide use. The development of these systems allow for a certain amount of standardization for courses (which will help the students and instructors with familiarity with the system) but also allow for instructors to customize the user interface to a certain extent. Having access to a system that is set up for them, with the ability to customize for their own classes, this has been a great tool for many educators. Speaking from personal experience, using a CMS is much more convenient for a teacher than maintaining your own website using Microsoft’s *Frontpage* or a similar software.

The reasons for students to take classes from a virtual school are multiple, such as: scheduling conflicts in their current school, no qualified teaching staff, courses not offered, students looking for advanced (AP) coursework, credit recovery students (failure or illness), and home school or non-traditional students. Just the simple presence of an online virtual school is increasing the opportunities for students to get a quality education that would not have previously been available to them.

In a nationwide survey of virtual school students, the top reasons for attending for high school students are as follows: 1. Earn college credit, 2. Work at my own pace, 3. Class not offered at my school, 4. Complete High School Requirements, 5. Get extra help in a subject, and 6. Fit my schedule.

As the virtual schools continue to expand, and increase access to education, research is starting to come in that says the quality of the education they are receiving is equal to that of a traditional classroom. In fact a United States Department of Education analysis found that “on average, students in on-line learning conditions performed better than those receiving face to face instruction.” So not only are virtual high schools increasing student’s access to courses, instructors, and subject matter that was previously unavailable to them, it is also providing them with a quality education. It is interesting to note, however that online learning was found to most effective when “blended” with face to face instruction.

Most states Virtual Schools are available to students in their state for no charge, however states vary as to what age they can begin taking classes. For example, the South Dakota Virtual School is available to any middle or high school student in South Dakota, if their home district participates. At least 9 states offer one course or another for any student Grades K-12. The large majority of Virtual School students tend to be High School Students.

This is an exciting and groundbreaking time to be involved in education. Not only has the development of these technologies increased access for “normal” students, but the limitless possibilities for those who are non-traditional students is great, as well. Students who before may have “fell through the cracks” now have opportunities to continue their education. An example would be students who are moving around a lot because of family instability, can enroll in Virtual School courses and continue their education. Students who are forced into the workforce for any number of reasons, no longer need to give up the goal of a high school education. It seems as though many of the original courses were developed to help out the “high end” students (advanced placement, college credit, etc…) the possibilities for helping basically any student have become evident to those who are running the programs.

Any time you hear the words “revolution” or “technology”, and “education” you are going to have some many differing opinions as to how effective these new practices are, or will be. I remember as a college student myself hearing about the “growing trend” of having “year round” school, and ending the “traditional” school year of 9 months on, and 3 summer months off. And although there have been some districts in some states that have adopted this, with varying degrees of success, it has not become “the revolution” I was told about.

One of the major concerns with Virtual schooling has to be the quality of the education. Now although recent reports that virtual schools students score the same, or better than traditional students in classes. It is interesting to note that in evaluating learning that virtual schools like to score their students performance compared to the student’s previous performance. “Test scores for these programs will tend to be lower than state averages- is important because some online programs are focused on low performing or at risk students.” Although, isn’t the converse also true? Virtual schools, based on the number of students who want to earn college credit that are registering for classes, both attract high end and low end students.

The best way to improve student achievement has been through effective instruction. As my Superintendent often says, “You have good teachers, you get good students.” So, to assure the effectiveness of virtual schooling, it becomes very important to measure the effectiveness of virtual teaching. While half of the school districts in the country offer at least one on-line course, there is hardly a consensus agreement as to what makes effective “virtual teachers”.

The current research does have some suggestions as to what makes a successful on-line teacher, but even these are not agreed upon. For example a study conducted by Boise State University, “Going Virtual: Unique Needs and Challenges of K-12 Online Teachers” found that most on-line teacher have 15 years of traditional teaching experience, meaning that they are comfortable with their subject matter, and want to move to the flexibility or interactive environment of the virtual classroom. While most states require the teachers to have a certain amount of training in online instruction, it has been noted that “technology does not teach students, effective teachers do.”

While there are also some “guidelines” as to what makes a successful online teacher, there is no real consensus as to what those are. While “Training” seems to be the most common trait, according to this class’s textbook, “Myth 2: Instructor training is required for anyone planning to teach at a distance.” Their argument is that although training can’t hurt, content knowledge is the most important competency of any teacher. Feedback is also considered a key as the teacher needs to know not only how the students feel about what is being taught, but many schools also assign “mentors” to each of their online educators.

One thing that is evident, there is a great need for effective evaluation of Virtual High Schools. While most would agree that “Teaching at a Distance takes Skill” there just isn’t enough current research, data, and determine exactly what all of those are. We are starting to gain an understanding of what makes courses successful, and others not. But these findings are certainly not complete, and will continue to grow in time.

In addition to studying the evaluation of the teachers of the courses, there are numerous other factors that must be weighed when evaluating a virtual school, such as: student assessment (both prior knowledge and computer skills), content assessment, technological assessments, course instance assessments (the psycho-social environment of the classroom), and “other factors” (such as parental involvement). In such an interactive and dynamic environment, as an online classroom, it would only make sense that effective evaluations would also have to dynamic… and therefore, difficult to evaluate.

The one thing that is evident is that “virtual schooling” is not going to go away. In fact, when you start looking at the costs involved, it is certain that virtual schooling will continue to grow. One report stated, “…the average per pupil cost of online learning was $4,300 for data gathered in the fall of 2008, compared with an average per pupil cost of $9,100 for a traditional public school”. While the “start-up” costs for virtual schooling can be high: equipment, teacher training, software (such as a CMS), etc. In the long run virtual schooling can come out ahead financially. For instance, if a school district needs more space, “instead of sinking millions of dollars into school construction, districts could save money by investing in online courses, which would allow schools to provide instruction before, during, and after school less expensively.”

As an educator, one of the best developments in the field of virtual schooling is the use and development of Course Management Systems. First off, the use of a CMS establishes a “classroom” like feel. When a virtual school adopts a CMS for use in their classes, they are making things easier for their teachers (who would have a course “format” given to them) and they are giving the students a familiar format in which to learn from. Although a CMS does not give a teacher great “freedom” in the design of their on-line course, there is some customization possible.

The use of a CMS can help learning. Not only by the familiarity with a “structure” but by the availability of the information to the students. “Once faculty members began using the CMS, they realized they could cover more material in a single term, which proved beneficial to both faculty and students.” Initially, the use of a CMS can take some time to get used to, and will be time consuming, not because of the work itself, but because of the interaction involved on an online classroom. “For instance, virtual school instructors contend that it takes more time for them to teach an on-line course than it does to teach a comparable face to face course.” This increase in time commitment is due to the fact that most successful online courses are more interactive.”

The use of this interactivity between the instructor and the student, although time consuming, seems to be a real positive in the mind of faculty. “Several noted that, in traditional formats, it always seemed that the students regarded the class as over as soon as they walked out the door. However, the online component meant that this perception changed.” The use and development of CMS’s is certainly one of the more interesting facets of distance education.

The more I researched and read on the subject of Virtual Schools, the more I found myself thinking that “this is the way of the future”. With the continuing advances in technology, there is almost going to be no limit as to where and what students will be able to learn. Students are more and more familiar with technology at an earlier age. With the invention of numerous electronic devices, including cell phones, laptops, blackberry’s, digital reading devices (like Amazon’s Kindle) it is very likely that students in the future will not only be taking “virtual classes”, but they won’t even require a laptop type of device to take it. Many of the new video game systems (Playstation 3 and Xbox 360, for example) have internet capability and many of the “handheld” gaming systems(Nintendo DS and Playstation Personal) already have a small “wi-fi” system in which they can communicate with each other. If they can access the internet, be it through a phone, Kindle, video game systems, etc… they would be able to access any CMS that they are registered for.

Although I do feel there will always be a need for “traditional” schools, as students will want to meet together, and learn together, and there are some social aspects of the school experience that can’t be duplicated by an on-line course. However, I do think the future of education will look much different, students won’t be forced into 2 or 3 elective courses that their school has to offer, but the possibility to take dozens of other courses that will be available to them through the virtual school.

This is a real exciting future. The possibilities are endless. I know that many years ago, I’d watch “Star Trek: The Next Generation” and snigger as the crew members on that show read “books” from a little screen that they carried around. I thought it was ridiculous. Amazon.com’s number one selling device is the “Kindle” basically the same type of device I used to laugh about. The cost of these classes will continue to go down, as the equipment becomes more common. The effectiveness of the courses themselves will only go up as teachers become acclimated to teaching in this new format. There will be better methodology for evaluating courses, their content, and the student’s abilities. The students will continue to become more familiar with technology at earlier ages, and they will become more competent in their use of them.

The development of virtual schools may be frightening to some, as it the beginning of a “leap forward” in the field of education. However, as with many things, most fear comes from unfamiliarity. In 20 years, people will most likely look back and laugh when about when they took their first “virtual class”. Progress can be difficult, and certainly I don’t envision a future where everyone is going to welcome virtual schooling with open arms immediately. It will take time and it could be a long process, but I believe it will be one that will be very fruitful and beneficial to everyone.

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